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Service-Learning during the Covid Era: A Perspective of GK-12 Student-Coordinator

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgment I thank God for the strength to work on this paper. I thank my GK-12 director and academic advisor, Professor Anatoli Rapoport, for his continual support and guidance. I would also like to thank Mrs. Andrea Blocher and Mr. Matthew Bastian for their collaboration in making this project feasible. I acknowledge my former coordinator, Mr. Mohan Yang, for the training and guidance. Finally, I thank my wife and family for their unwavering support.



SERVICE-LEARNING DURING THE COVID ERA

A Perspective of a GK-12 Student-Coordinator

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STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Razak Dwomoh is a PhD student in Social Studies Education and an instructor for EDCI 361—Social Studies in the elementary school at Purdue University. He examines the historical thinking of young learners, historical (mis)representations in text and trade books, and global citizenship education. He plans to pursue a career as a faculty member in education. Razak has been involved with the GK-12 program for the past two years as a participant and coordinator. In this article, he details the impact of the GK-12 program, the lessons learned from going remote, and how we can be flexible with remote learning in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning, according to Jacoby (2003), is an approach to teaching that is “grounded in experience” and aimed at addressing both individual and community needs (p. 4). Service-learning (volunteerism, internships) and community service can enhance civic competence, engage students in experiential learning, and help them solve societal problems. As John Glenn puts it (cited in Willis, 2002), service-learning has a *terrific* ability to stimulate the interest of disengaged students—students who demonstrate apathy in class toward teachers and peers. Despite the importance of service-learning, the precariousness of the COVID-19 pandemic posed a challenge for students and educators. In this paper, I highlight the COVID-19 pandemic ramifications on the Graduate Students Engagement in K-12 Classrooms (GK-12) program, the lessons learned from going remote, and how we can be flexible with remote learning in the future if there is a need for us to adapt our programming to other crises.

GK-12 is a program the Purdue graduate school offers to graduate students across departments. The program is an opportunity for graduate students (masters, doctoral, and postdoctoral students) to practice teaching in American classrooms through observation, co-teaching, and teaching. GK-12 participants incorporate research into lesson plans to teach K–12 students in the local schools under the supervision of mentor teachers (MT). Mentor teachers mentor diverse students—mostly international graduate students—engage in collaborative teaching, and foster a shared culture. Past GK-12 graduate students found the program impactful in building competence for academic and professional jobs. I address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on GK-12 from the lens of a participant and a coordinator. I offer suggestions for GK-12 participants, mentor teachers, and GK-12 coordinators on how they can be flexible with remote learning in the future.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Demographics of the School

The community partner for the GK-12 program is Tecumseh Junior High School (TJHS), located in Lafayette, Indiana. Tecumseh Junior High School is a seventh and eighth-grade middle school with about 1,111 students and 130 staff members. The average class size is about 20–22 students.

The mission of the school is to provide “a safe, supportive, and challenging learning environment for all students. Through meaningful and intentional interactions, TJHS students will gain knowledge and develop the skills necessary to become productive and responsible citizens” (Tecumseh Junior High School, n.d.). The student population is diverse: 43.7% White, 29.5% Hispanic, 18.7% Black, 7.3% Multiracial, 0.2% Asian, and 0.3% American Indian. The school makes accommodations for 7% of English Language Learners. This diverse student population makes TJHS an inclusive school community.

GK-12 Recruitment Process

Tecumseh Junior High School welcomes GK-12 participants every semester the program is open. The administrative representative of the school and an eighth-grade science teacher, Mrs. Andrea Blocher, serves as the liaison between the school and the GK-12 director, Professor Anatoli Rapoport. Mrs. Blocher helps recruit teachers to pair with GK-12 participants based on the course they teach and participants’ research interests.

The enrollment in the GK-12 program begins with callout recruitment. Approximately two weeks before the callouts, the GK-12 director and coordinator send emails to departments, program coordinators, and graduate organizations at Purdue to inform graduate students about the program. The callout is a platform to introduce the GK-12 program, discuss the program schedule and timelines, and share an interest form to collect attendee information. After the callout, interested participants send their curriculum vitae (CVs) to the GK-12 coordinator to check their background experiences and preferences and make a participant list for pairing mentor teachers.

After compiling the final list of participants, the first training workshop begins to give participants an orientation about the program and complete a background check. During the first workshop, participants learn about the basic rules and regulations in elementary and secondary schools. Afterward, the GK-12 coordinator

collaborates with Mrs. Blocher to schedule a day and time during the week for participants to meet and greet the mentor teachers. Three subsequent training workshops are offered as a resource to discuss the teaching and learning experiences of participants. The program requirements include participants’ visits and active engagement in classroom activities for a minimum of seven hours every week, participation in four training workshops, weekly journal reflections, and developing an inquiry-based lesson plan to teach.

Descriptions of the Classroom Experience

I participated in GK-12 during fall 2019 before the COVID-19 epidemic intensified (Figure 1). As a participant, I worked with Mr. Matthew Bastian, a seventh-grade social studies teacher. There were 132 students divided into two groups (academic class and challenge class). The “academic class” consists of four class sessions. The “challenge class” has two class sessions and faces more advanced and challenging instruction and tests than the academic class.

The teacher starts class by assessing the students’ prior knowledge with a bell ringer—where the students use guided notes on their think pads to answer questions (Figure 2). Before the teacher introduces a new lesson, the students watch CNN 10 (current news explained within 10 minutes) on the projected screen. The CNN 10 viewing is a strategy Mr. Bastian uses to foster social understanding. Parker and Beck (2017) assert that teaching current events and enduring public issues “is a must in elementary and middle school classrooms” (p. 174).

Timeline of Participation in the Classroom

The participants work with mentor teachers one day a week for 10 weeks. The first two weeks are for classroom observations. During these weeks, the participants observe the MT, the classroom environment, class management techniques the MT employs, and the teaching style. They also assist the MT in class activities and work with the students. Weeks three to five are for co-teaching and mentoring by the MT. During these weeks, the participant works with the MT to plan an inquiry-based lesson plan for the teaching day. All participants are eligible for a Student Service-Learning Grant to fund their inquiry-based projects, up to \$500 per person and \$1,500 for a team. Participants work with their MT to create a list of teaching resources they need for their class and on the teaching day, and they give the list to the Office of Engagement for the Student Service-Learning Grant.

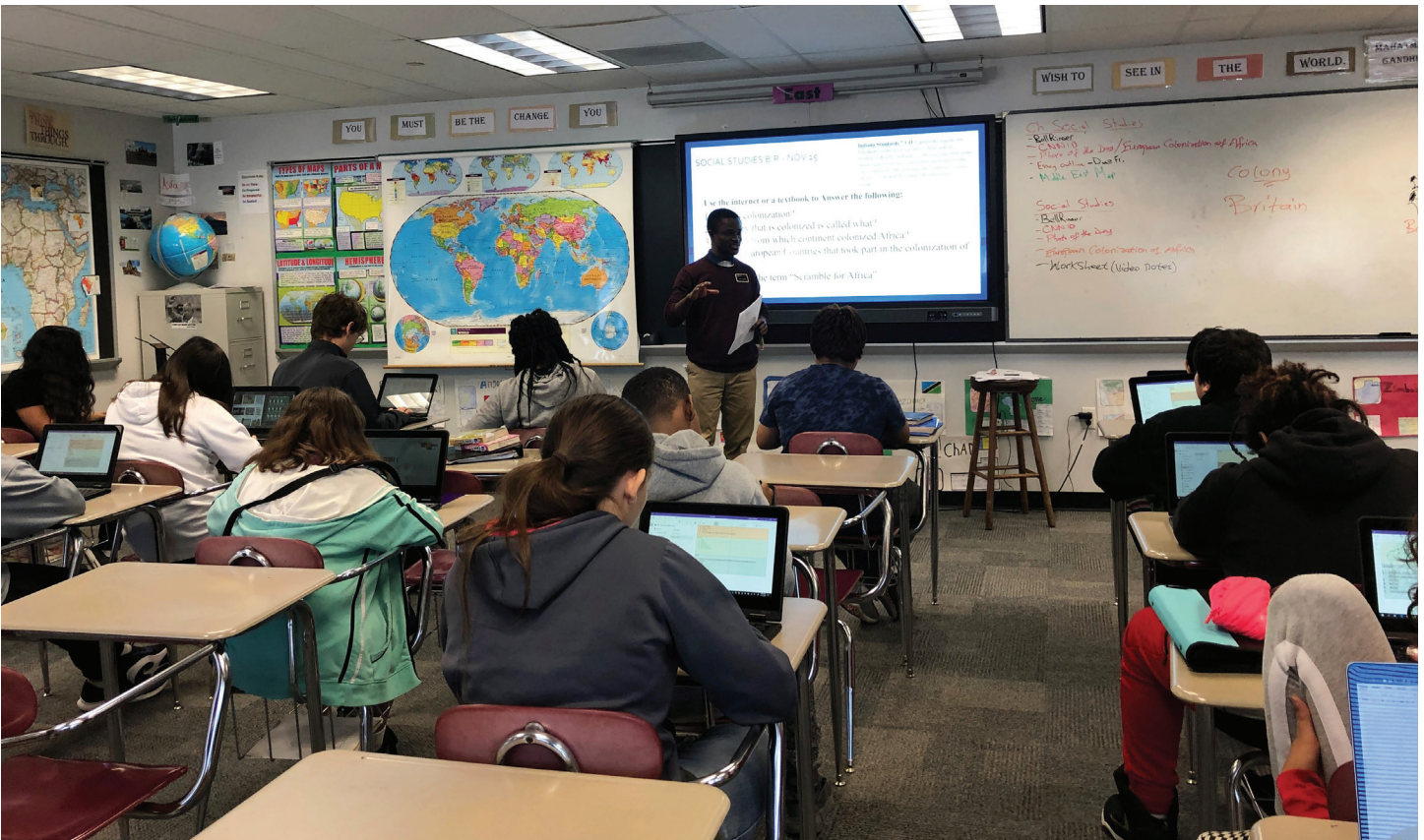


Figure 1. Author teaching in a seventh-grade social studies classroom. Photo courtesy of Mr. Matthew Bastian and Dr. Anatoli Rapoport.

SOCIAL STUDIES B.R.- NOV 15

Indiana Standards:7.1.11 Explain the reasons for European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Southwest Pacific and analyze the long and short term impact that colonization and imperialism had on the social, political, and economic development of these societies from both European and indigenous perspectives.

Use your Guided Notes to Answer the following:

1. What is colonization?
2. A country that is colonized is called...?
3. Countries from which continent colonized Africa?
4. Name 5 European Countries that took part in the colonization of Africa.
5. List 2 reasons for colonization

Figure 2. A sample of a bell ringer. Students use guided notes to answer questions on think pads before a lesson.

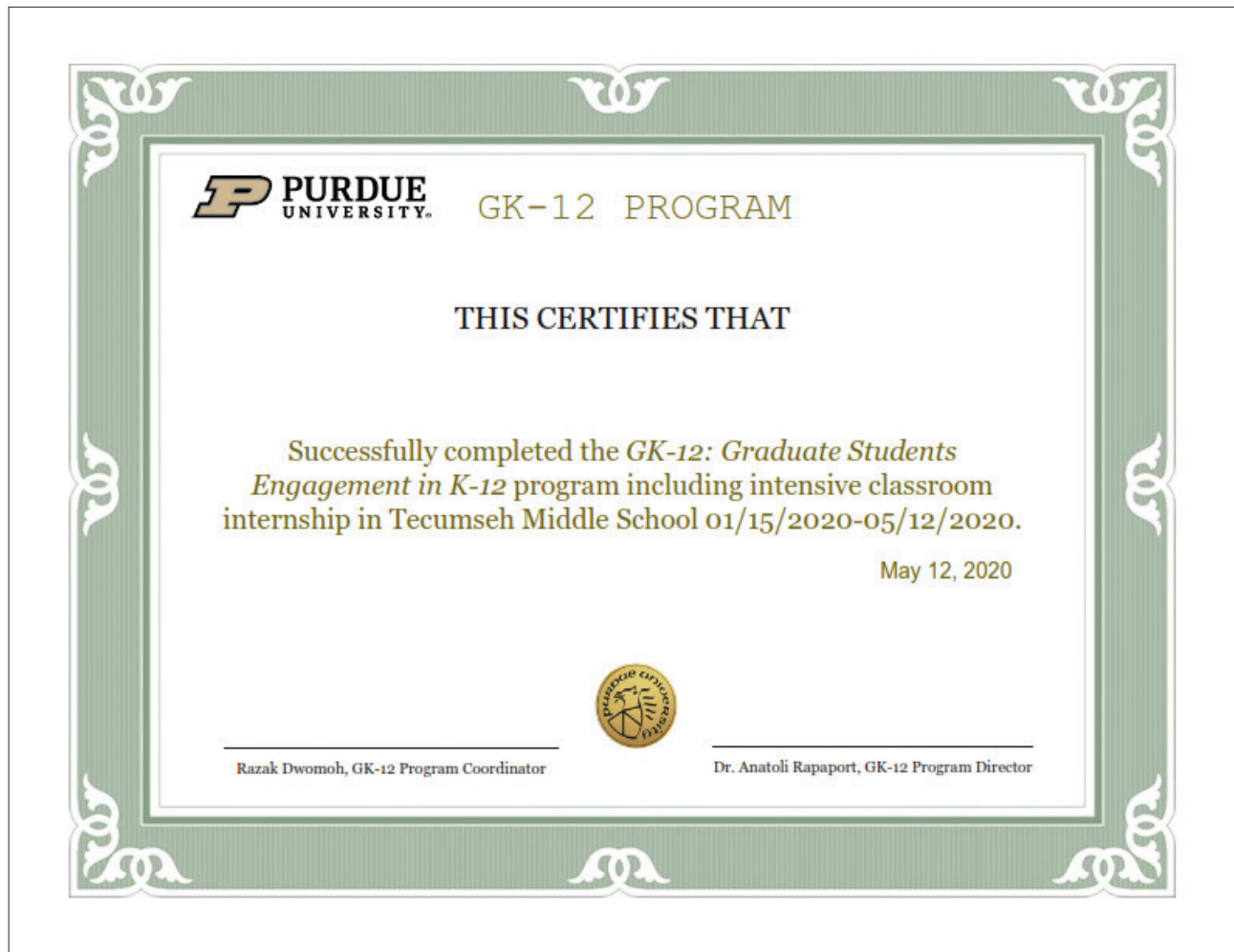


Figure 3. A template of the GK-12 participant certificate.

In weeks six to eight, the second phase of co-teaching, the participants practice teaching lesson plans during the training workshops and assist the MT in teaching in school. Weeks nine and ten are the teaching weeks, and each participant teaches the whole class with the lesson plan developed. The GK-12 coordinator visits each participant during the teaching day to observe and assess participants' teaching, take notes, take photos and videos, and provide constructive feedback. After completing the program, all the participants and MTs earn a certificate with professional development points (Figure 3).

PROGRAM IMPACT AND COVID ADAPTATIONS

I categorize the impact of the GK-12 program under two outcomes: mentoring and networking, diversity and inclusion. I highlight the significance of each outcome, the pandemic ramifications for the program and the lessons learned from going remote, and COVID adaptations.

Mentoring and Networking

Mentor teachers model instruction to participants. Participants build a networking system through partnerships and collaborations. As a participant, I learned to use bell ringers and CNN 10. I incorporated them in my lesson plan for the first time in my graduate school experiences. I learned this from my mentor teacher. I learned from my MT to move around and ensure students are not disengaged from a class activity while surfing the Internet with their think pads. I offered feedback formatively to assess the students and assisted the struggling students. During the respite, my MT explained why he did something or why he responded to a student in a particular manner. My MT and I drafted a budget to receive a grant to purchase the materials and resources the class needed, such as books, artifacts, an atlas, posters, and games. Through class observations, I developed the confidence to teach a full-class session.

I coordinated the GK-12 program during spring 2020. That was the time when the pandemic intensified, and there were various lockdowns. As a coordinator, I facilitated the callouts, mentor teacher pairings, teacher meet and greet, and the first two training workshops (all in-person). The rich experience in GK-12 is in the school visits, so the lockdowns curtailed its efficacy for all stakeholders involved. Gauging from the community impact, one could ascertain that school closures can render the program short-lived because students cannot visit the schools. A participant shared a scaffolding technique the MT used—a phone call. That is calling and asking for assistance from a peer in the classroom with a hand gesture. When a student does not know the answer to a question, the teacher asks the student to use a phone call. The peer who receives the phone call helps the student by telling the answer. The phone call strategy allows the teacher to assess two students concurrently, foster interpersonal relations among students, and enhance comprehension through retelling.

Due to the precariousness of the COVID-19 pandemic, we suspended the GK-12 program for both the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. The vibrant networking and mentoring opportunities the program offers became passive with extended breaks and lockdowns. Participants had to stop sharing their weekly reflections that we used to track progress and evaluate their service-learning experience with their MT. The pandemic upended the service-learning experiences and curtailed the mentoring opportunities between the MT and the participants.

COVID Adaptations

Participants visited their respective classes before schools were closed by the Tippecanoe School Corporation on March 13, 2020. We had to restructure the entire program. We decided to suspend the visitations on the teaching days. We asked all participants to stop the school visitations. We asked the participants to work closely with their mentor teachers and assist in the e-learning experiences (when offered). We decided that if things did not return to normal for the rest of the semester, we would use some aspects of participants' e-learning involvement to assess them in place of the visitation to observe them teach on the teaching day. We had to cancel the callout sessions, the training workshops, and co-teaching. Participants used the WebEx application to teach, actively engage students, and facilitate learning. That caused some difficulty in tracking the teaching progress of the participants. The coordinators, participants, and mentor teachers started developing the skills in using these online platforms to teach.

Participants developed an inquiry-based lesson plan for a virtual class. That was the first time they practiced a virtual lesson plan. Before the teaching day, we asked the participants to teach the lesson they developed during the fourth virtual training session. We gave feedbacks where necessary, and they prepared to teach in their respective classes. The Office of Engagement also extended the deadline for submitting the final report for the grant. The participants and their MTs earned an educational service certificate that served as proof of their teaching involvement and experience in the American classrooms.

Diversity and Inclusion

Through the GK-12 program, American middle-graders learn from visiting scholars from different cultural backgrounds. That can create the awareness and the consciousness of democratic citizenship education in non-Western contexts for students to appreciate dissimilar perspectives of citizenship education (Dwomoh, 2021). The service-learning experience Purdue Graduate School offers advances diversity, equity, and inclusion. That is a learning opportunity for graduate students (international students often participate). Participants immerse themselves in teaching, meeting teachers and students from different races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds.

GK-12 coordinators meet and work with expert teachers and practice supervised teaching. The shared partnership between participants and mentor teachers helps the program coordinator build interpersonal relations and good communication skills through the callouts, emailing program heads and coordinators, training workshops for participants, teacher meet-and-greet, and mentor teacher recruitment. The GK-12 coordinator builds the skills and expertise in offering internships and supervising diverse people.

The remote learning that COVID-19 brought left little or no room for the participants to adapt their teaching. The participant can hardly tell whether the information is well conveyed to the students, students understand what is said, or the students misconstrue what is said. Before the remote learning, the participant could tell through their gestures or facial and verbal cues if students struggled to conceptualize or hear clearly what is said.

COVID Adaptations

I offer suggestions to new participants, program coordinators, and mentor teachers. Participants should identify

and appreciate students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and not personalize comments students make, especially if they seek to inquire about their uniqueness and culture. I learned to show empathy to my students toward learning. Future coordinators should explain to the participants about the exact school address. A few participants missed their route to the school on few occasions. The program can be structured to allow participants to visit a single class (one session) multiple times instead of visiting multiple class sessions in one day to enhance the teaching and learning experience. In future crises, coordinators should be flexible and adapt the GK-12 programming to suit the learning needs of the students by allowing the participants to rehearse their lessons with them and offer constructive feedback.

Often, there is the temptation to call out students to read or answer a question when students show apathy in class. Some students volunteer to read aloud without any direct motivation or reinforcement from the teacher. A participant shared that some students, during presentations, prefer to have a friend stand next to them for emotional support. Other students can present on their own, too. However, Bickford et al. (2020) suggests that teachers should take into consideration the “classroom’s social and emotional tension” (p. 273). Also, teachers should ensure there is minimal “classroom discussion tardiness” during remote class discussions (Dwomoh, 2020, p. 145). In locating texts for students to read and enhance critical thinking, teachers should be aware that “no resource is flawless, yet teachers should be aware of gaps or misrepresentations” (Bickford et al., 2020, p. 259), and new historical texts do not necessarily promise a more historical representation than older ones (Bickford & Dwomoh, 2021).

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The GK-12 program contributes significantly to students’ academic and social learning. From observation as a former participant and a coordinator, every year (fall and spring semesters), about 10–15 graduate students across disciplines and from diverse cultural backgrounds participate in the GK-12 service-learning program. The program impacts about 700–800 students at Tecumseh in four subject areas—language arts, math, science, and social studies. From participant and student observations and document analysis of participants’ journal reflections, I address four impacts the program offers for the students at Tecumseh. The community impact of the program includes role modeling for students, acquisition of new instructional tools and resources for student

learning, a support system for struggling students, and a shared culture.

Role Modeling

The service-learning provides an opportunity for students at Tecumseh to learn from the academic fields of GK-12 participants—and the students begin to see them as role models. Participants’ backgrounds include subjects such as climate science, physics, English education, engineering, social studies education, and communication. Students who demonstrate an interest in these career fields start to see the participant as a potential role model. The students build rapport with the participant on subsequent visits and ask questions about job prospects in those career fields. Professionally, I dressed and behaved in a manner the students can model. These experiences can bolster the interests of students and prepare their minds for college and advanced studies.

New Instructional Materials and Resources for Students

The service-learning grants enable the MT to purchase new learning materials and resources for the students. Since new participants partake in the GK-12 program every semester, participating students have access to new learning materials and resources each semester the program is open. The instructional resources can include posters, books, atlases, board games, electronic devices, and audiovisual aids. The purchasing amount ranges from \$500 for a single application to \$1,500 for a team application. These instructional resources help the students to practice hands-on learning and make instruction robust. The students get excited when they see their classroom decorated with new learning materials.

Support System for Struggling Students

Mentor teachers teach five to six different class sessions of about 120 (average class size of 20–22 students) per day. Students’ achievement levels vary from high ability to struggling learners. Teaching over 120 students who have different learning abilities can be overwhelming. Nevertheless, teachers at Tecumseh demonstrate competence in building the proficiencies of each student. When GK-12 participants help the MT co-teach, they assist struggling students by spending extra time with them on tasks and in small group discussions. The mentor teacher, during teaching, often stands in front of the students to write on the board. That allows the participant to move around and observe the students’ learning

and active engagement, assist, or print hard copy worksheets for students who encounter electronic challenges and offer support to students who struggle with a task. Some students have little confidence in calling out to the teacher or a peer for support. The additional support the students receive in class improves their task scores, builds their confidence, motivates them to learn, and fosters their learning proficiencies.

Shared Culture

The GK-12 service-learning creates the space for the students and the participant to share unique cultural experiences. As a participant, I had the opportunity to share my unique culture with the students and learn from them. Most of the teaching in the class was through videos, activities, the use of technology, and reviewing previous lessons. During my co-teaching, when my MT was teaching about the European colonization of Africa, the students asked questions that my MT thought I could speak to more than he could because I am from Africa. That learning opportunity facilitated a discussion between the students and me about the European colonization of Africa and some historical facts and antecedents in Africa. We discussed the African culture, some historical icons, and the food and activities common to us. From that time, I noticed the students were open to asking questions about Africa. Later, my MT informed me the students enjoyed the class and related well to the topic because I shared practical experiences with them. He allowed me to teach the rest of the lesson, and he shared with me how the students were informed and increased their understanding of the culture of Africa. I realized that such forums for discussion would help both the students and the participants develop consciousness about global citizenship education.

STUDENT-AUTHOR IMPACT

The GK-12 service-learning experience was indispensable and rewarding. The program prepares international students to teach in American classrooms. As an international student, I did not expect to teach a whole class of middle-level students in the United States until I enrolled in the GK-12 program. This exposure harnessed my confidence in effectively delivering instruction to young learners in the United States. I participated in the GK-12 program to (1) immerse myself in the teaching practices in the United States and (2) to have a good perspective and experience of the K-12 standards and mode of student assessment. This program was the first time I formally observed middle graders, co-taught, and

taught a lesson that I prepared for seventh-grade students in an American classroom.

I learned to design an inquiry-based lesson plan. I made drafts for my coordinator and MT to review until I developed a good lesson plan. I was able to actively engage my students and communicate appropriately and effectively with them in my teaching. I realized that effective teaching did not only mean preparing a good lesson plan. It must actively engage the students throughout the lesson. At every point in the instruction, give the students something to do to engage them.

I learned effective teaching strategies. The students often use their think pads to answer questions, for online quizzes, and in their writing. During co-teaching, my mentor teacher advised me to pause and talk about the main points in the video I showed to the students. I incorporated his suggestions in the subsequent lessons, and it proved very helpful. During teaching, my MT drafted a “guided note” to allow the students to work and “fill in” sessions of the points I was teaching, to engage the students. That support from my MT was helpful for me in my teaching. The session of my class that astonished me was the last video of the lesson that guided the students to do the assignment (video notes). Some of the students complained they could not hear the video clearly, and that was why I had to pause each session to clarify the points raised in the video. The students said they did not hear the presenter narrating the story because of his accent. I realized the importance of selecting narratives that are visually and audibly representative to students. It is helpful to look for two or three native Americans to review the videos or graphic organizers before using those tools to teach middle-graders.

In addition, identifying students’ preferred names to call them can be challenging in the first two to three weeks. The class seating charts have the name and picture of every student in the class. Those are helpful resources I used to recall the names and faces of students, and they helped build a good teacher-student rapport. I was able to call each student by their name by using the seating chart until I learned the name of every student.

GK-12 helps in addressing ethnocentrism, cultural shock, and biases. I come from a postcolonial African country, accustomed to the British curricula standards. Some aspects of my Eurocentric views and learning strategies conflicted with the American learning standards. Some terminologies we use in Ghana are context-bound and differ in American classrooms. I envisaged schooling in America would help in

conceptualizing the variation in instruction, scaffolding, and selection of learning materials. The knowledge I acquired from GK-12 has enriched my perspectives, ideologies, and appreciation of diversity. It will help me fit into any educational system and contribute positively to diversity. I have learned the disparate educational models in the United States and Ghana that will help me to represent both countries in global educational discussions.

CONCLUSION

The GK-12 program is one of the robust service-learning programs at Purdue. The program advances Purdue's goal of fostering diversity, inclusion, and social justice. I wrote this paper to inform graduate students, especially international graduate students, and the Purdue community about the importance of the GK-12 experience in creating a platform to practice teaching in American classrooms. International graduate students would develop skills, understanding, and teaching practices that foster learning for both high-achieving students and struggling learners in a typical American classroom. The community impact of the GK-12 experience includes role modeling, new instructional materials for students, the support system for struggling learners, and a shared culture. The author's impact includes the opportunity to integrate research into lesson plans, prepare internationals to teach in American classrooms, and address ethnocentrism, cultural shocks, and biases.

The precariousness of the COVID-19 epidemic caused some adaptations to be made in the GK-12 program by introducing the participants, mentor teachers, and the students to remote learning. The participants developed inquiry-based lesson plans for a virtual class and

delivered instruction remotely. In remote learning, GK-12 participants should be more flexible with students and appreciate their questions or comments from culturally and linguistically diverse perspectives. In the future, the GK-12 program can be restructured to allow participants to visit one class session multiple times instead of visiting multiple class sessions in one day per week to enhance the teaching and learning experience. In future crises, coordinators should be flexible and adapt the GK-12 programming by allowing the participants to rehearse their lessons with them and offer constructive feedback before teaching.

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